

Chapter 6 – Tracking the Fall of Creation

*The myth of Prometheus means that all the sorrows of the world have their seat in the liver.
But it needs a brave man to face so humble a truth.*

François Mauriac¹

The Reformers' biblical literalism?

It is rather strange, is it not, that a natural creation that the Bible and the Church until late mediaeval times called "good" is now usually viewed as thoroughly tainted by evil? The creation hasn't changed, so what has reversed our worldview so diametrically? The answer, as I will try to show, may not be completely divorced from the fact that secularists also see nature as fundamentally flawed – the same mind-set, and essential elements of the same world-view, govern both viewpoints.

Was the negative view of nature that developed over five centuries and that now predominates in popular theology, in evolutionary biology and in theistic evolution, a correct or even an inevitable step? If we take a biblical view, the answer must be no, as we saw in Chapters 1-4. Although the first significant manifestations of it we have seen in the sources are in connection with the Reformation, with its motto *Sola Scriptura*, the teaching goes far beyond, even against, Scripture in a way that the earlier "good creation" teaching did not. That makes it potentially heterodox (as indeed we saw Augustine believed it to be in the previous chapter).

Does nature itself demand such a pessimistic view? Apparently so, if judged by the passionate way that people express doubts over God's goodness in creation from within or without the community of faith. But evidently *not* to the millions of earlier Christians who lived far closer to early death, plague, natural disaster and the ravages of the wild beasts we have put safely in zoos or rendered extinct. They praised God for all creation. Nature has not changed – our attitudes have. Why? And why should that have been associated with the time of the Reformation?

As we have seen we cannot find the answer in the Church Fathers, or the Scholastics, whom both Luther and Calvin studied at University in Germany and France respectively. Neither can we trace it to contemporaneous movements like the devotionally-minded Brethren of the Common Life, who were responsible for Luther's early schooling. Their Thomas à Kempis wrote: "*If your heart be right, then every created thing will become for you a mirror of life and a book of holy teaching. For there is nothing created so small and mean that it does not reflect the goodness of God.*"² And it certainly cannot be attributed to the Reformers' personal psychology, unless they started an epidemic of infective melancholy.

It has been proposed to me that it was the Reformers' emphasis on the literal interpretation Scripture that is the key issue. That they took the literal meaning more seriously than even their

¹ Mauriac, François, in *Le Nœud de vipères* (1932), cited from *Oeuvres romanesques*, vol. 2 (Paris: Flammarion, 1965) p. 166; Gerard Hopkins (trans.) *Knot of Vipers* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1951) p. 151.

² Thomas A Kempis, *Imitation of Christ bk2 ch29*.

immediate predecessors is undoubted. Just a generation before, earlier humanists like John Colet (a friend and influence of Erasmus), though eager to reform the purity of the Church and to preach from Scripture, nevertheless still depended heavily on allegorical interpretation, and was only feeling his way with the literal sense. In fact, Colet did not see his role as an expositor at all (which was fortunate as he had little grounding in the original languages), but as a mover of hearts.³ His interpretations generally followed established precedent. In contrast the Reformers, like the humanist Erasmus as far as he accompanied them, treated discovering the primary, literal⁴, meaning of the Scriptures as the key task.

But though they broke new ground in literal understanding, we have seen in the first three chapters that the texts do not actually take us to a fallen Creation unless we're already committed to going there. Furthermore we've seen in Chapter 4 that those earlier writers who deal with the texts literally, such as Josephus and Irenaeus, and even John Chrysostom when he comments on Genesis 3, do not end up in that place. A respect for the literal meaning of Scripture is therefore clearly insufficient. One must question if it is a factor at all when it requires such a profound misreading of that literal meaning. The Reformers were generally better expositors than that.

At the same time, it is clear that only those taking the literal meaning of Scripture seriously *can* fall into error about that meaning. At the time of the Reformation the Catholic Church as a whole had only a limited interest in Scripture, and a predominantly allegorical understanding of it at that. Luther's opponent Cardinal Cajetan actually made himself somewhat unpopular amongst conservative Catholics by recognising, in the light of the Reformers, the need to tackle the literal meaning in his commentaries. His Genesis commentary was appreciated and even used by Calvin when writing own. But it was only after the Council of Trent that far more attention was paid, once more, to interpretation of Scripture by Catholics, and by that time, of course, the Reformers' work was itself at least an unconscious influence on it.

It is therefore difficult to completely disentangle who influenced whom, and how much. Nevertheless it still appears the case that teaching on the corruption of nature has even now remained much less prevalent in Catholicism. Unlike the Westminster Catechism, quoted in the last chapter, that of the Council of Trent doesn't mention it, though that may reflect its structure, "creation" coming under the heading of the Creed, "God the Father, maker of heaven and earth". But even the modern Catholic Catechism states that "physical evil" exists only because Creation has not yet reached perfection (rather than falling from it)⁵, that each creature contains "*its own*

³ Gleason, John B, *John Colet* (University of California Press, 1989) P.117ff.

⁴ One must always remember that, to the Reformers, the "literal" did not mean "literalistic". The Bible translator William Tyndale perhaps expressed the position best in his *Obedience of the Christian Man*: "*Nevertheless, the Scripture uses proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but what the proverb, similitude, riddle, or allegory signifies, is always the literal sense, which you must seek out diligently. In English we borrow words and sentences from one thing, and apply them to another, and give them new meanings. We say, 'Let the sea swell and rise as high as he will, yet God has appointed how far he shall go' – meaning that the tyrants shall not do what they would, but only what God has appointed them to do. 'Look before you leap:' whose literal sense is, 'Do nothing suddenly, or without advisement.' 'Do not cut the bough that you stand on:' whose literal sense is, 'Do not oppress the commoners;' and is borrowed from hewers...*"

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #310.

goodness and perfection”⁶ and that predation should be seen in terms of the order and harmony of God’s will, not of evil.⁷

Prometheus unbound

The main explanation lies, I propose, in an anomaly of the rise of Renaissance humanism (as it is now called), whose agenda forged the prevailing worldview of our own culture. The Renaissance is noted for recovering the knowledge of the ancient classical texts (and of the Greek Church Fathers too, incidentally). The Augustinian monk Luther was deeply influenced by it⁸, and Calvin is best described, intellectually, as a humanist. But humanism from its inception encompassed the idea that “*Man is the measure of all things*”.⁹ Rudolph Bultmann compares its viewpoint with the kind of Christian faith it began to replace:

*[Classical humanism] expresses the conviction that man by virtue of his spirit is able to shape his life in freedom and to subject to himself the world in which he has to live his life. The Christian faith expresses the conviction that man is not his own master, that the world is an alien country to him, and that he can gain his freedom from the world only with the help of divine grace which is freely given to the world from beyond.*¹⁰

Cameron Wybrow, referring to a set of texts popular during the Renaissance, the *Hermetica*, writes (and provides extensive evidence) that:

*The themes in the... passage – likeness to God, immortality, nothing being impossible for man, the mastery of all arts and sciences, the comprehension of all nature by the human mind – are themes which were eventually linked with Genesis 1:26 and carried through the Renaissance into the modern age.*¹¹

In the early Renaissance classically-informed humanists embraced the new anthropocentrism whilst seeking to retain their Christian identity, by seeing Adam as embodying this divine manhood’s autonomous freedom and creativity, whilst playing down or denying his corruption. The Fall therefore came to be seen as, at least in part, a good thing in enabling man’s development.

But from the late fourteenth century, a more suitable hero was found in the classical Prometheus, the Titan who created mankind but then gave fire to them and was punished by the gods. Boccaccio’s influential *Decameron*, for example, is arguably built around various retellings of the Prometheus story¹². The image continued in use for centuries – for example Mary Shelley’s

⁶ *Ibid.*, #339.

⁷ *Ibid.*, #340-341.

⁸ “While the Lutheran movement seems unimaginable without the preexistent German nationalist humanism, the Reformer himself remains equally unimaginable without the preexistent Biblical humanism, and for that matter without humanist modes of appeal to the layman.” A.G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973, pp. 51-52.

⁹ Protagoras, 490-420 BC, as quoted by Plato, *Protagoras*.

¹⁰ Bultmann, Rudolph, “Humanism and Christianity.” Cited by Roger Shinn in *New Directions in Theology Today*, Vol 6, p. 174. I’d dispute that Christianity implies escape from the world, though, but redemption together with the world.

¹¹ Wybrow, Cameron, *The Bible, Baconianism, and Mastery over Nature*, (New York: Peter Lang 1991) p.168.

¹² Barcella, Susanna, *The Myth of Prometheus in Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron (MLN 119.1 Supplement (2004) S120-S141)* <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mln/summary/v119/119.1abarsella.html>, accessed 06/01/2016.

Frankenstein was, rather ironically, subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*. Her husband's *Prometheus Unbound* employed the myth to glorify revolution. Even in the last century Franz Kafka used it in a short story, *Prometheus*, to express Existentialist angst. In his version even the gods had forgotten the point of the argument – perhaps a reflection on the foundational status the myth had acquired for western society. For as Ernst Cassirer describes:

*[W]e have reached the point at which the Adam motif undergoes the inner transformation that enables it to merge with the Prometheus motif. No change in the content of the thought is necessary to complete this transition; a slight shift of the accent suffices... If we compare Boccaccio's euhemeristic interpretation of the Prometheus legend with the medieval interpretation, we shall see that a change in basic attitude has taken place. In his *Genealogia deorum*, he distinguishes between two creations; the one called man into existence, and the other conferred upon this existence an intellectual content. The rough and ignorant man that came forth from the hands of nature could only be perfected by another act of creation. The first gave him his physical reality; the second gave his specific form. Here, Prometheus is a human hero of culture, the bringer of wisdom and of political and moral order.¹³*

Cassirer later says:

For the Renaissance, this image is evidently more than a mere allegory; it becomes the symbol of what the Renaissance is and is striving for as a total intellectual movement.¹⁴

Alister McGrath agrees with this assessment of the centrality of the Prometheus myth from Bacon through to the Enlightenment, particularly in relation to attitudes to nature:

The rise of technology was seen as paralleling Prometheus' theft of fire from the gods. Defining limits were removed. Prometheus was now unbound, and humanity poised to enter a new era of autonomy and progress. The rise of technology was seen as a tool that would allow humanity to control and shape its environment, without the need to respect natural limitations.¹⁵

However, the appeal of the Prometheus myth was not universal. The same enduring spirituality that called forth the Reformation, probably not divorced from the kind of self-denying spiritual influence seen in the Brethren of the Common Life, meant that the aggressive secularism of Italy was diluted in the more restrained humanism of the northern Europe of Luther and Calvin. To some extent the Reformation was a reaction to Renaissance ideology, at least as it became embodied in the political and moral corruptions of the Roman Catholic Church.

But the myth did not leave the Reformers unaffected. Luther certainly read the *Decameron*, since he adapted one of its tales himself in his *Table Talk*¹⁶. The humanist Erasmus, who influenced both Luther and Calvin, admired Prometheus as a rational man:

¹³ Cassirer, Ernst and Domandi, Mario, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (University of Chicago 2010) p.95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.166.

¹⁵ McGrath, Alister, *The Re-enchantment of Nature* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988) p.78.

¹⁶ Luther, Martin, *Table Talk* (Hazlitt W, London: H G Bohn, 1862) p.353 DCCCLXIX.

*Prometheus means in Greek a man who takes counsel before acting, and Epimetheus one who acts first, and only then does common sense enter his head. To act like Prometheus, prometheusthai, is to meet misfortunes when they threaten by taking thought.*¹⁷

As Joseph C McLelland explains:

*Erasmus uses the myth in various ways, chiefly as symbol for his view of that virtù that is the hope of the human condition. Prometheus is an example for our imitation, that we should endeavour by human craft to strive after what is best and highest. It is noteworthy that we have now passed into the familiar Promethean vocabulary of human striving, human potential, human artifice: Prometheus est nobis imitandus... humano artificio praestari.*¹⁸

Reformation religion was, in part, a conscious revolt against this vaunting of human autonomy. One can surmise that this would include the Reformers' theological reaction against the humanists' sanitized Prometheus/Adam, who brings only wisdom and blessing, to re-emphasise the downside of the myth – the judgement of Zeus and the despoiling of nature. Raised in and influenced, as they were, by a worldview that had elevated man so far above his Scriptural station, an equally global judgement might seem to be what Scripture necessarily, though not overtly, implied, rather than the more exclusively human Fall it actually describes.

But there is a more specific element, too. The Greek Prometheus cycle goes on to describe how part of Zeus' judgement on man was to create a woman, Pandora. The earliest version is a rather misogynist anticipation of Popeye the Sailor's "Wimmin is Jinx":

*From her is the race of women and female kind: of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble, no helpmates in hateful poverty, but only in wealth.*¹⁹

There is already an inviting parallel here with Eve for those already seeing Prometheus as Adam. But later tellings recount the famous story of the jar from which Pandora unwittingly, by foolish curiosity, released all the evils in the world:

*For ere this the tribes of men lived on earth remote and free from ills and hard toil and heavy sickness which bring the Fates upon men; for in misery men grow old quickly. But the woman took off the great lid of the jar with her hands and scattered all these and her thought caused sorrow and mischief to men. Only Hope remained there in an unbreakable home within under the rim of the great jar, and did not fly out at the door; for ere that, the lid of the jar stopped her, by the will of Aegis-holding Zeus who gathers the clouds. But the rest, countless plagues, wander amongst men; for earth is full of evils and the sea is full. Of themselves diseases come upon men continually by day and by night, bringing mischief to mortals silently; for wise Zeus took away speech from them. So is there no way to escape the will of Zeus.*²⁰

¹⁷ The Adages of Erasmus I i 31.

¹⁸ McLelland, Joseph C., *Prometheus Rebound: The Irony of Atheism* (Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1988), p.66.

¹⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 590-593.

²⁰ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, ll.90-105.

It was actually Erasmus himself who first translated the Pandora myth (and, by a mistranslation, introduced “Pandora’s Box” into the culture). Given this extensive background, stretching across Europe and back in time into the fourteenth century, it is hard to imagine how the Reformers could have *resisted* reading these classical accounts back into their understanding of the Fall in some way. The bare account of Genesis seems not to do justice to the gravity of man’s fall from such an exalted role as the humanist Adam/Prometheus ideal. Indeed, Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 3:18, to which I referred earlier, appears to confirm the association by quoting an ode by Horace:

*When from Heaven’s fane the furtive hand
Of man the sacred fire withdrew,
A countless host — at God’s command —
To earth of fierce diseases flew;
And death — till now kept far away
Hastened his step to seize his prey.*²¹

The line prior to the quotation reveals the owner of “the furtive hand”. He is the “son of Iapetus” – none other than Prometheus himself! The ode refers both to him and to the resulting curses of Pandora’s box.

Now clearly it would be simplistic to suggest that Calvin took his doctrine from the Greeks (or their pagan Roman interpreters). Rather I am suggesting that the narrative of humanity that developed through the Renaissance, and that is so aptly summed up in the Prometheus myth, had by Calvin’s time thoroughly coloured humanist thinking about man, and hence the way that he read the text of Genesis. Or to put it another way, it is doubtful that Horace’s quotation would have seemed fully appropriate to the interpretation of Genesis 3.18 from within a different cultural context.

So natural evil, we now find, flew out of a jar in a Greek myth, and not primarily from Christian Scripture at all²².

The ratcheting up of the description of evil and the increasing involvement of Satan, until it reached the level we have seen in Wesley’s time, could be seen either as embellishment over the years, or perhaps as an unconscious reaction to the ever more autonomous and divine self-image of man, and the deliberate exclusion of God, as the Renaissance became the Enlightenment and the Enlightenment our own self-obsessed age. In either case the doctrine of the fallenness of creation turns out, to our surprise, to be an unintended by-product of the very same man-centred ideology that brought our secularist and materialist culture into existence.

Theodicies and antitheodicies

A related factor in the growth of the concern about “natural evil”, to which I alluded in the Introduction of the book, was the development of theodicy in the form pioneered by Gottfried Leibniz in his book *Theodicy* of 1709. If theodicy had ever been a question for mediaeval minds, it

²¹ Horace, *Carmina*, III.

²² One can perhaps trace the influence of John Chrysostom too, who sees natural evil in Romans 8, but why Calvin should prefer his (minority) view over his usual mentor Augustine still requires explanation. In any case, Chrysostom taught the subjection of Creation to corruption for man’s correction, not the escape of uncontrolled evil outside his control.

had taken the form of how God could be holy given the existence of evil (“evil” always meaning, as we have seen already, the wickedness of rational beings).

Leibniz, however, also began to tackle what is now sometimes called the “atheist problem of evil”, or in other words, how God can even *exist* if evil of any sort exists. In this, given that atheism was so rare in his time, he may have been opposing the Socinian heresy, whose proponents claimed that evil challenged God’s omniscience (for he would not, they said, have created the world knowing that evil would arise).

As time went by, and the Enlightenment produced an atmosphere countenancing for the first time rejection of the very existence of God, a truly atheistic form of the “problem of evil” was taken up by those like David Hume:

*Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?*²³

This form of presentation should be familiar from anyone who has encountered the New Atheists. In the empirical atmosphere of Hume’s times, and with theodicy being no longer a so much a matter of God’s holiness but of his competence, it would have seemed grist to the mill to bring in evidence from the natural world to support the case. With God now placed in the dock, a natural Creation corrupted apart from its own choice made a far better charge than the voluntary wickedness of rational souls.

Nature, remember, was already coming to be seen as fallen and therefore in part evil. As Josef Goebbels found, a lie repeated often enough comes to be seen as incontrovertible truth. If you’re always arguing about *why* God allowed nature to be evil, you soon forget that the first proposition (that it *is* evil) is open to question.

I suggest, however, that even this strand of the development owes its origin to the Prometheus myth – or at least to the view of man as autonomous that made the Prometheus story so congenial to the western mind. It both expressed and helped to form the worldview of human independence from God, and was also a factor in reinforcing it. People were no longer attempting to understand God’s ways in theodicy, but to submit them to human criticism.

As far as our own subject goes, the Prometheus myth helped to seal the image of nature as cursed by an oppressive God to become mankind’s enemy, and even its own. Pushed further, nature could even be seen as a fellow victim of the injustice at the heart of things, a conclusion encouraged by the Darwinian picture of a cosmos founded on constant deadly struggle, and effectively abandoned to its own devices by a Deist God (whether or not one believed in him).

The questions about God’s moral responsibility seem pressing and inevitable – and perhaps unanswerable – because they are implicit in the western world-view, which is like world-views in general quite invisible to those who hold it. See from outside that world-view, by an Augustine or an Aquinas, for example, the questions are more likely to seem meaningless. That is likely to be the reason we simply do not see them addressed in the earlier periods.

²³ Hume, David, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1776).

Some implications

The Prometheus myth is very potent, both in itself and as an incredibly apt summary of the whole humanist project. In that sense it is the foundation myth of our present civilisation, replacing the mediaeval Christian archetype, Adam, with a pagan fiction, the Titan Prometheus, autonomous and wise – and unjustly punished by Zeus. Once one is alerted to this motif, it turns up everywhere you look in the modern world, which is not surprising since cultures mould themselves by their myths, even when the origins have been largely forgotten.

For example, Adam's morality was based on God's command – Prometheus's on autonomy in despite of the gods' authority. Which is closer to the basis of modern morality? Adam lived in obedience to God apart from one sin – to Prometheus self-determination is above all things. Adam was wise and righteous, but became corrupt – Prometheus brought refinement and progress to an originally rough-hewn and restrictive creation. God was the great Artificer of everything, and Adam his imitator and assistant – Prometheus is now the artificer, and a Designer is denied any place in the closed system of nature. Adam's work was to tend and subdue the creation – Prometheus's, in Baconian fashion, to torture it for its secrets and bend it to his will. Adam knew that every creature must give an account to God – Prometheus expects God to give an account of his treatment of every creature. Prometheus is Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, Galileo the mythic martyr of science to religion, the indomitable will of the people, and the improver of a bodged creation through genetic modification or transhumanism.

In amongst those, in theological terms he is also the Microcosm whose Fall was so calamitous that it inevitably took out the whole of nature with him. Adam's recourse, after the sin that affected only his seed, was repentance and faith. Prometheus's perceived destiny is to put things right himself – and to transfer the blame for the "mess" to God, author of a wayward evolutionary process (or for some Creationists, to Satan, elevated to the role of demiurge of a secondary, corrupted, creation).

But what if my thesis is correct, and the whole concept of natural evil is no more than a re-imposition of ancient pagan pessimism over the innovative Christian view of a creation marred only by what sinful man himself does to it? What if the harm that nature causes us is, as the Fathers taught, the result of God's righteous judgement rather than of nature's participation in evil?

In that case, we have distorted Christian doctrine very badly to accommodate it to a worldview that is, in fact, diametrically opposed to the Christian worldview. It was the desire for autonomy that led mankind into exile from the garden. If, directly or indirectly, the quest for that autonomy has led us to doubt or deny the goodness of God's creation, then there must be serious consequences.

I will look at some of those, but also at the more positive effects of correcting them, in Chapter 11. Before that, though, I want to take a look at nature itself, through the eyes of science, and show that accounts of its delinquency have been, to say the least, somewhat exaggerated.